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AUTHOR Aiex, Nola Kortner
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ABSTRACT

The hybrid music of the group "Kid Creole and the Coconuts" shows traces of every popular music style that has aroused New York City during the past 40 years--big band swing, Latin dance music, calypso, reggae, disco, funk, soul, rock, and movie pop. The fictitious characters the members of the band assume on stage, together with their outlandish costumes (the "Kid" affects the clothes and style of a Latin lounge lizard, while the other band members dress in various nightclub styles), and their heavily choreographed antics, turn their shows into a mixture of rock concert, musical revue, or as one critic has said soundtracks in search of cinema." However, although "Kid Creole and the Coconuts" are cult favorites in their home base of New York City, they fit no current radio formats and receive little airplay on mainstream American radio. In Europe they are recognized for the American caricatures they are, and in Mexico and Latin America they have had more than one hit single. Their albums are sophisticated and witty, sometimes mixing songs in English and in Spanish, but such a visually oriented band may discover that the theater is their real home. (NKA)

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Nola Kortner Aiex
October 1987

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"Kid Creole and the Coconuts," an innovative band in existence since 1979, is the outgrowth of a failed disco group called "Dr. Buzzard's Original Savannah Band," originally formed in 1974 by two brothers, Stony Browder and August Darnell (formal name: Thomas August Darnell Browder). The two, of mixed French-Canadian and Dominican parentage, are quintessential New Yorkers, despite the exotic names they give to their musical groups. In 1976 "Dr. Buzzard's Original Savannah Band" had a top-40 hit called "Cherchez la Femme," but with the waning of the disco craze and the usual personality clashes present within any group of talented musicians with different musical ideas, the band broke up.

Darnell then created "Kid Creole and the Coconuts," and gave his new band a mythology: "Kid Creole represented the modern American who embodies all races and cultures."[1] Kid Creole's hybrid music, which Darnell called "mulatto music," shows traces of every popular music style that has aroused New York City during the past 40 years--big band swing, Latin dance music, calypso, reggae, disco, funk, soul, rock, and movie pop.

Kid Creole's (Darnell) persona is that of a tropical lounge lizard or gigolo, complete with forties-style zoot suits. His accomplice or sidekick is the percussionist Andy Hernandez, alias "Coati Mundi," a short, round-eyed, bald, acrobatic clown. The three blond "coconuts," right out of a third-rate nightclub chorus line and led by Darnell's wife, Adriana Kaegi, form the nucleus of the band. Ms. Kaegi is also the group's choreographer costume-designer. The fictitious characters the band assume on

stage, together with the outlandish costumes, and their heavily choreographed antics, turn their shows into a mixture of rock concert, musical revue, or as one critic has said "soundtracks in search of cinema."[2] Darnell himself has stated that his vision is based on the night-club scenes in the original "King Kong" film.

Kid Creole's concept albums have dealt with bilingual crossover dreams, an idiosyncratic Caribbean version of "The Odyssey" (Darnell has an M.A. in English and was, at one time, a Long Island high school teacher), and the social commentary that Darnell's self-conscious status as a mulatto has provoked. However, the music always maintains a light, amused touch. Some of his witty album titles are "Off the Coast of Me," "Fresh Fruit in Foreign Places," "Tropical Gangsters," and "In Praise of Older Women."

The only problem with this imaginative, sophisticated band is that they have not yet penetrated, and most likely never will, into mainstream America's consciousness. In Europe they are recognized as the American caricatures they are, and in Mexico, Latin America, and England they have had more than one hit single. Here in the land of market research, outside of their home base of New York where they are cult favorites, they fit no current radio formats, having been told variously that they are too black, too white, too Latin, and by MTV, that they are "not rock and roll."[3] As a "Variety" reviewer astutely noted, "Kid Creole and the Coconuts are a rare brew of Caribbean beats, big-band charts, disco and rock that, like the itinerant heroes in

many of Darnell's songs, can't seem to find a home on U.S. radio."[4]

Although the band rarely sings in Spanish anymore, as they did on their first albums, they are essentially still a New York Latin group, with all that implies, meaning a band that is Latin-funk-based rather than Latin-rock-based. New York Latinos have always been more influenced by black music than by rock. Darnell has been quoted as saying, "The energy, the vision, the love, the poetry in the music all come from the streets of New York--I could not write anywhere else in the world."[5]

The strong New York disco scene, which quickly became formulaic, actually began with a definite minority cast--dominated by blacks, gays, and Latins. The tendency to mix rhythms and influences--common in Latin American styles--is also inherent in New York disco's combined "salsa" (meaning "sauce," but really just a synonym for hot, up-tempo Latin music) and Brazilian percussion (Brazil has more percussion instruments than any other Afro-American country by a wide margin). Since the beginning of the Latin dance era in the U.S., which started with the tango danced by Vernon and Irene Castle in the 1914 revue "Watch Your Step," individual dance crazes have invariably coincided with revivals of Latin styles.[6]

However, Latin-based music, although it has permeated every type of American music, has never enjoyed extended commercial success, and it remains to be seen whether the continued growth of the Hispanic population in the U.S. will alter that pattern. A recent article in the "New York Times," comments that the

growing influence of Spanish lyrics "reflects the growing Hispanic population in the U.S. and the increasing assimilation of Hispanic teenagers and young adults." However, the author also recognizes that the acceptance of Spanish lyrics may be "part of a cyclical rediscovery of Hispanic music, from Carmen Miranda in the 1930's to the rhumba craze of the craze of the 1950's to Latin disco in the 1970's."[7] With the success of "La Bamba," the Cuban-American group "Miami Sound Machine," a Latin band that sings only in English, and even Madonna singing in fractured Spanish, Latin-based music does seem to be growing in popularity.

One of Kid Creole and the Coconuts earliest songs, "The Girl from Havana," combines English and Spanish lyrics in one song: first Darnell does a reggae version, then "Don Armando" (no longer a band member) does a Spanish translation in Xavier-Cugat-style, and the song concludes with a crisscrossing of both singers and both languages again. In "Fresh Fruits and Foreign Places," the album cuts are sequenced in Spanish and English, providing a satirical point-counterpoint of society and life as whole.[8]

The Hispanic population of New York City has continued to be more-or-less stable, and its base is primarily Puerto-Rican and not Chicano or Cuban. For all Latinos though, popular music is dance oriented, cross-generational and classless. Kid Creole, popular with New York Latinos, still have never managed to come up with a hit single in the United States (if you can't get on the radio, it's difficult to have a hit), still an absolute

necessity for success.

Mainstream America has never exhibited much sense of humor or of satire as far as popular music goes, or much interest in urban social commentary, either. Darnell's "travelogues and character studies often recount the polarities of black/white, jungle/civilization, infidelity/purity...playing the smug smoothie with a cocked eyebrow."[9] In "Fresh Fruits and Foreign Places," Darnell's Caribbean variant on the "Odyssey," the liner notes for one cut, "In the Jungle" sound like a storyline from an old "B" movie: "Surrounded by Amazonian mulattos bent on propagating themselves, we are regarded as animals to be mated with their slaves and then eliminated." Notes for another cut continue in the same vein: "I am as much dazzled by this futuristic city as the Finnemanians are apparently by me. Having never seen brown skin before these people regard me as an alien god. Perhaps I should settle here in paradise and let sleeping dogs lie."

Kid Creole's foremost weakness, in my view, is the lack of a really outstanding or intriguing singer. None of the principals sing very well, and although that is part of the idea--Ricky Ricardo's TV Latin nightclub or the Leisure Tour's tacky beach club set that appears in their video--it prejudices the group in the long run. Perhaps Kid Creole and the Coconuts is simply too stylized and surrealistic a concept for popularity outside the big city. The band does put on a colorful show though. As one reviewer wrote after a recent live performance--"one is besieged with comic multiple exposures of iconography from four decades of

popular culture--a melange of Ricky Ricardo, calypso, go-go girls, and break dancing."[10]

August Darnell is presently working on a Kid Creole version of the "Mikado," and he may discover that the theater is his true home, rather than the airwaves. Certainly, such a visually oriented band deserves to be seen by more people. Darnell himself has said, "I want to assault the American intelligentsia through theater and then come back to rock and roll."[11]

1. Jon Pareles, "The Pop Life." New York Times, December 25, 1985.

2. Barry Walters, "In Praise of August Darnell." Village Voice, January 14, 1986.

3. Op. cit.

4. Variety, July 22, 1987.

5. Pareles.

6. John Storm Roberts, The Latin Tinge (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 207.

7. Jon Pareles, "Spanish Is in the Groove on New Pop Records." New York Times, September 22, 1987.

8. Hot Sauces, p. 122.

9. Walters.

10. Stephen Holden, "Pop: Kid Creole Group." New York Times, December 31, 1985.

11. Pareles, "The Pop Life."